



# THE KING'S TRAGEDY

BY  
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

EDITED BY THE  
REV. K. C. MACARTNEY, M.A.  
*Professor of English Literature*  
*Madras Christian College*

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

HUMPHREY MILFORD  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON BOMBAY & MADRAS

1918

PRINTED AT  
THE GUARDIAN PRESS  
SEMBUDOSS STREET, MADRAS

## INTRODUCTION

---

### Dante Gabriel Rossetti

If it were necessary to choose one man round whom to group the most interesting figures in the literature and art of England during the second half of the nineteenth century, I do not doubt that Rossetti would be the person named. His work does not entitle him to a place among those poets who are the equal heritage of mankind; nor can he be considered the greatest among the poets of his own time and country, or even of his own school. Outside his circle Tennyson and Browning, and within it Swinburne and Morris, are greater than he. Yet he was from about the year 1848 to the time of his death, whether by chance or because of his commanding and attractive personality, the centre to which gravitated most of what was best and most original in the talent of the period.

The main facts of his life may be briefly told. Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was the second child and eldest son of Gabriel Rossetti, an Italian whose political views had exiled him from his own country and who had settled in London in 1821. From 1831 he held the post of Professor of Italian in King's College, London. Rossetti's mother was the daughter of an Italian physician who came to England in 1789 and married an English lady, the only one of Rossetti's grandparents who was not pure Italian. Christina Rossetti, the poetess, and Mr. W. M. Rossetti, the critic, were the poet's sister and brother. He had also an elder sister who joined a sisterhood in the English Church.

Rossetti was born on May 12, 1828, in London, and

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

received his general education at the King's College School from 1837 to 1842. At school he seems to have formed no special friendships and to have distinguished himself in no particular way. His home life would appear to have been dominated by Italian, rather than by English, interests. Italian seems to have been the home language and his father kept open house for any Italians who happened to be in London. It was natural that such conversation as Rossetti heard should, in these circumstances, deal with politics, and he and his brother and sisters apparently heard so much of them as to produce in them a lifelong aversion to the subject.

In 1842 Rossetti, having decided to become an artist, began his professional education under F. S. Cary, with whom he studied in a somewhat desultory fashion until 1846. About this time he dropped the name Charles, and reversed the order of his two other names in order to give precedence to the name of the poet Dante. From 1846 to 1848 Rossetti studied in the Antique School of the Royal Academy, where he met Holman Hunt and, through him, Millais. In 1848 he placed himself under the instruction of Ford Madox Brown, the painter, because he was dissatisfied with his progress at the Academy.

From this time his career may really be said to begin. In the autumn of 1848 Rossetti, Holman Hunt and Millais, Woolmer, the sculptor, James Collinson, the painter, F. G. Stephens, the critic, and Mr. W. M. Rossetti, formed themselves into the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, of which more will be said presently. The immediate result of the foundation of the Brotherhood was an increased output of work, which began in 1850 to provoke violent criticism in the Press. In fact, so violent and so harsh were the attacks made upon them that the Brotherhood was reduced to despair, and some of its members contemplated emigration. The situation was saved by the intervention of Ruskin at the suggestion of Coventry Patmore. He

## INTRODUCTION

wrote two letters to the *Times* in May 1851 strongly supporting the Pre-Raphaelites, and such was the weight of his authority that his two letters produced a complete change in popular feeling.

It was about this time that Rossetti became engaged to Miss Siddal, a lady of great beauty and much artistic talent, but little education. At the time of the engagement Rossetti's financial position made an immediate marriage impossible, and it was not until 1860 that it took place. During the time of their engagement Miss Siddal developed consumption, which was the cause of her death in 1862, not quite two years after her marriage.

In 1854 Ruskin, who had three years before chivalrously come to the rescue of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, became personally acquainted with Rossetti for the first time. This was the beginning of a friendship which in its first years secured to Rossetti something like freedom from the pressure of financial worries, but later died away, mainly, no doubt, because Rossetti had ceased to need a patron and was not of a temper to endure the intimate friendship of a man whose attitude towards him was always that of a mentor. In any case the friendship had cooled away by 1868.

In 1856 Rossetti came for the first time into contact with Burne-Jones and William Morris, who it must be remembered were not members of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. About the same time he met Swinburne. With all these he remained on terms of close friendship for the greater part of the remainder of his life. From this time to the date of his wife's death, Rossetti was at the height of his powers. He was becoming famous as a painter, and had already written most, and published some, of the poems which he afterwards gave to the world in the volume of 1870.

After the death of his wife Rossetti took a house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where his brother, Swinburne, and

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

for a time George Meredith, also lived. For some years he seems to have spent a busy life, but about 1867 he began to suffer very much from insomnia, a malady which eventually produced disastrous results. Finding no satisfactory cure he began, about 1870, to take chloral, apparently without realizing the dangerous possibilities of the drug. There is no doubt that the delusions and fits of depression to which he gradually became subject were directly traceable to the use of chloral, and that it enfeebled his constitution and probably hastened his death.

In 1870 Rossetti, yielding to the importunity of his friends, recovered the manuscript of his poems, which had been buried in his wife's coffin, and published them. Their reception was all that could be desired. They at once admitted him to a high place among contemporary English poets, but his triumph was not long lived. In 1871 a person named Robert Buchanan, whose character and motives may be judged from the fact that he disguised himself under a pseudonym ("Thomas Maitland") contributed an article to *The Contemporary Review* entitled "The Fleshly School of Poetry; D. G. Rossetti." This attack was an astonishingly disingenuous and cruel attempt to find in Rossetti's poems indecent and immoral tendencies, which no one but a person suffering from an obsession would have looked for, and no one of any critical perception would have found. It would be possible to pillory Tennyson or Keats, and easy to defame Shakespeare or Milton by the methods employed by Mr. "Maitland". Even the most innocent lines taken from their context and introduced by the necessary sort of letterpress may be made to mean far more than any reader would ever have extracted from them for himself.

It would be absurd to maintain that the language of Rossetti is not sometimes more unconventional than the language of ordinary conversation, or of some other poets. But in this respect he is certainly no more open to criticism

## INTRODUCTION

than Keats, and much less so than the two greatest of our poets. The truth is that the poetry of passion is always unconventional, and to many people the only standard of morality is convention. Rossetti is never anti-moral either in tendency or suggestion. To him physical beauty is always the accompaniment and, in some mysterious way, the expression of spiritual excellence. That Mr. Buchanan (or Maitland) did not see this impugns his intelligence, that he should have acted as he did impugns his honesty, that he should have delayed his retraction until after the death of the man whose mind he had tortured deprives him of the last vestige of a claim to generosity of feeling or the most rudimentary sense of justice.

To this unspeakably cruel attack Rossetti replied in the pages of the *Athenæum* in an article entitled "The Stealthy School of Criticism" remarkable for its temperate tone, and utterly crushing as an answer to his libeller. But the mischief was already done. Respectable people looked askance at Rossetti's poetry, and even at the present day there are many people whose opinions are palpably coloured by Mr. Buchanan's article. He was not content to leave the matter alone after Rossetti had answered him, but published his remarks in pamphlet form. It was this venomous persistence that preyed upon Rossetti's mind, and when his health gave way he became firmly convinced that Buchanan's literary efforts were only part of a huge plot to drive him from Society. That Buchanan desired some such event was a reasonable inference from his behaviour, but that any one of importance shared his views was entirely untrue.

It was about this time that Rossetti met Mr. Theodore Watts (afterwards Watts-Dunton), the eminent critic and novelist to whose devoted friendship he owed very much of such happiness as he enjoyed in the closing years of his life. One other prominent figure in our literature came into close touch with him a few years before his death,



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

Mr. Hall Caine, who first met him in 1879, and became a regular inmate of the house in Cheyne Walk in the summer of 1881, and remained with him until his death.

In 1881 Rossetti again published his poems, in two volumes, the first of which under the title "Ballads and Sonnets" contained *The King's Tragedy*. In these volumes the work of the 1870 issue was included. The reception which the book received was generally respectful, but it lacked the enthusiasm that greeted his first publication. This was not, perhaps, altogether due to the malign influence of Buchanan, though that was certainly a contributory cause. Very much of the best work of the 1881 volumes was no longer new; and it may also have been that Tennyson's great volume of 1880 challenged a comparison which it is no detraction of Rossetti to say his work could not sustain, as very few volumes of English poetry could have done so.

Towards the close of 1881 Rossetti became seriously ill, and though he rallied early in the following year he was again ill before the end of the winter. As soon as it was possible to move him he was taken to Birchington-on-Sea, in hopes that the change might give him fresh strength. His vitality, however, was slowly ebbing away, and he died on the evening of Easter Sunday (April 9th 1882). He was buried quietly at Birchington a few days later.

There are many matters connected with Rossetti's life which it seems unnecessary to touch on here. At no time was he well-known to the public, and during the later years of his life he definitely avoided anything like publicity. His paintings were never exhibited in the great galleries, and he only twice published his poems, in each case long after the composition of many of them. He was only once married and had no children. But he was not a lonely man. He had a very remarkable faculty for inspiring the most devoted friendships, especially in young men; besides those already mentioned, men like Arthur O'

## INTRODUCTION

Shaughnessy and Mr. Edmund Gosse were among the frequent visitors to his house during the seventies. Perhaps the greatest tribute to his powers in this respect was the ascendancy which he exercised for years over William Morris.

In appearance Rossetti was a man of middle height, about five feet eight inches; in later life he tended to corpulence. His hair was dark and abundant and he wore a beard and moustache. His complexion was pale and somewhat sallow, his forehead broad and high, his eyes deep-set and grey and wonderfully expressive. His voice was a deep baritone with a great range and a most noticeable musical quality. He was a perfect elocutionist and one of his most delightful methods of entertaining his friends was to read or recite poetry.

In politics it has already been said he took no interest; at the same time he was sufficiently interested in Ruskin's social reform schemes to take a class in painting at the Working Men's College. In religion he was a professed sceptic, though deeply interested in supernatural phenomena of any kind and, apparently, convinced of continued existence after death. A short time before his death he expressed a desire to make his confession and receive absolution, but as he never carried it out, nothing can be inferred from this. He was a man of commanding personality combined with the utmost generosity and the most complete courtesy of manner. His speech was colloquial, and he generally expressed himself forcibly as well as clearly.

Rossetti's habits were desultory rather than irregular; he rose late, worked when the mood was on him with intense energy, took his meals at irregular times, and generally sat up half the night talking. He was an attentive, but not a wide reader. In Poetry his favourite authors were Shakespeare, Keats, Chatterton and Coleridge, and among his own contemporaries Browning. He was also a great reader of English Ballad poetry. It is said of him that within a definitely restricted range he possessed

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

really great critical insight, and certainly the alterations of his own poems prove a considerable power of self criticism.

Of Rossetti as a painter nothing has been, or can be, said here. It is always unprofitable to discuss a picture if it be not before you; and even if it be, the technical knowledge necessary to a profitable discussion cannot be assumed where, as in this case, the interest in the artist-poet is mainly literary. Enough, therefore, will have been said when we remind ourselves that it was the intention of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to apply precisely the same principles to literature as to painting. Consequently certain effects which we shall notice in Rossetti's poetry will be found also in his pictures; in fact his poetry is in many respects just such poetry as we might expect an artist to write, and it has been said that his pictures are such as only a poet could paint.

### The Pre - Raphaelite School

In considering the poetry of Rossetti we have to bear in mind that he was not an Englishman, although born and brought up in England and, in a very real sense, devoted to English institutions. His father was entirely, and his mother half, Italian. During his boyhood his home language was Italian and most of his father's guests were of that nation only. In early life he made none of those school friendships which might have helped to anglicize his surroundings. Finally his profession as an artist was one upon which large numbers of English people look askance. In the popular mind the artist always appears as an unconventional, Bohemian sort of man, adhering very loosely to the laws of Society, and often to those of an even higher authority. Rossetti's name, his calling, his manner of life, and his most intimate friends were to some degree un-English, and it is therefore natural to find something not quite of our normal literature in his poetry.

In English poetry generally the Sonnet is somewhat of an exotic, more especially the Italian form of it, but

## INTRODUCTION

with Rossetti it seems to be the most perfect instrument to his hand. He uses it to express that special kind of erotic passion which was so grossly misrepresented by Buchanan. The beauty of the human form is as keenly felt, and the experiences of erotic passion are as rich, among the English as among the Southern peoples, but English people are more reticent about them, and usually dwell in their literature upon the ideal and spiritual experiences of love. It was because Rossetti broke away from this convention, or never felt its trammels, that he was attacked as a corrupter of morals. In actual fact his conception of love and beauty was as ideal and ethereal as Spenser's, and more spiritual than Milton's, for to him the outward form is always an expression of the beauty of the soul, without which external beauty is worthless.

It may, however, be urged that the excessively pictorial character of his poetry, with its concentration upon form and colour and movement, produces so vivid a picture of the physical world as to obscure the world of the mind and spirit, or at least to divert the attention from it. If there be anything in this argument, it may be supported by the fact that, unlike most poets of the nineteenth century, Rossetti was in no real sense a nature poet; and consequently the beauty which he described was always human beauty.

It must also be remembered that a poet who was one of an enthusiastic band which had set itself at open defiance to current taste and conventional standards in art, and had, to some extent, felt the weight of popular displeasure in consequence, was certain to feel a keen sympathy with all whose wrongdoing had brought upon them the stigma of social ostracism. It was no doubt through the fact that several of Rossetti's poems deal sympathetically with the tragedy of erring love that many people were led to think that there was something in his enemy's aspersions on his character.

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

But the whole of Rossetti's poetry does not deal with love. His power of treating historical subjects is well displayed in *The King's Tragedy* and *The White Ship*, and for this kind of writing he possessed very special qualifications. The great difficulty in presenting these narratives is the mass of detail which has to be welded into an artistic whole. Here Rossetti's powers as a word-painter are of the utmost service. He concentrates the attention of the reader upon a series of scenes, to which the rest of the matter acts merely as comment.

One other point must be mentioned which relates to the matter of Rossetti's poetry, namely his use of the supernatural as an aid to the general effect of a poem. It is altogether immaterial to discuss the question of Rossetti's beliefs in this matter, though he certainly did believe in the desire and the power of departed spirits to communicate with the living, and he was also influenced strongly at times by premonitory happenings. But quite apart from his beliefs, he accepted the occurrence of supernatural phenomena quite frankly and without apology for the purpose of his poetry. An excellent example of his use of this particular device may be found in *The King's Tragedy*, a still better one in *Rose Mary*, and perhaps the most characteristic instance of all in *Sister Helen*. It should be noticed that the effectiveness of this device depends not so much on what happens as on what is suggested. An instance of what is meant is the effect produced by the scenery of the spot in which King James first meets the Highland woman, particularly the fitful change of the moonlight, and by the terror of the King's horse. In *Sister Helen* again the effect is greatly enhanced by the contrast between Helen and her little brother, the child's innocence adding appreciably to the horror of the situation.

It is not possible to deal minutely with the matter of all Rossetti's poems, but two of them will be referred to

## INTRODUCTION

presently. It is, however, necessary to say something about one or two rather more technical points connected with the form of the poems. Everyone admits the musical quality of almost every poem that Rossetti ever wrote. He is in this the direct successor of Coleridge and Keats. At the same time he is by no means free from irregularities in rhyming which it requires all his skill in cadence to carry off. One of his peculiarities is a fondness for allowing a weak syllable to rhyme with a strong one. This is occasionally permissible in open syllables, that is in those ending in a vowel, but in closed syllables it is bound to be ugly.

In the matter of style and vocabulary Rossetti's work falls into two divisions. In the first his aim is to be as direct and simple as is compatible with poetry; an example of this style is *My Sister's Sleep*. At the period when this poem was written Rossetti seems to have had a very distinct preference for short words of old English origin, with a tendency to the use of archaic words. His later style is marked by a greater elaboration in phrase-structure and by a tendency to use Romance words, some times with a rather specialized meaning. There is a gorgeousness about some of the later poems, especially of certain of the sonnets in the *House of Life*, which, in spite of its impressiveness, hardly compensates for the freshness and sincerity of the earlier manner. *The Blessed Damozel* one of his most successful poems is among his earliest works.

This short study of Rossetti's diction cannot be closed without a reminder that even in his most elaborate manner, he never forgot the special kind of dignity which is given by simplicity; and he was always able to produce that effect of restrained and controlled strength and expressiveness which belongs to the simplest monosyllabic English. For one who wrote such musical verse as did Rossetti it is remarkable how very seldom he allows the

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

sound to dominate the meaning; his early devotion to clearness and directness never deserted him.

Any one who undertakes to study or write of Rossetti must sooner or later put to himself the question "What is Pre-Raphaelitism?" It is clearly something wider than the ideals originated by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of 1848, for some of those who are rightly known as the most distinguished of the Pre-Raphaelites were not members of that group. Pre-Raphaelitism is admitted on all sides to affect poetry, prose and painting, but the spirit which sustained it must, one would imagine, be traceable elsewhere in the national life. It is surely a tenable thesis that this movement is at once the outcome and expression in literature and art of a much wider and deeper movement than that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

One has been taught the importance of the French Revolution to that somewhat nebulous though very precious quality, (or is it a possession?) called "liberty" with such emphasis that one is liable to forget that many things besides "feudalism" or "tyranny" disappeared in its wake. The immediate effect of the Peace after Waterloo was to transform England with immense rapidity from an agricultural into an industrial country. So rapid was the change that the social life of the country was quite unable to adjust itself to the altered conditions. Poverty and discontent, which were the inevitable result of rapid economic change, kept alive the revolutionary spirit. This desire for change, this discontent with things as they were, could not long be confined to the realms of economics and politics. It spread very soon in other directions as, for example, in the direction of religion.

All this is generally admitted, but what does not seem to be so universally acknowledged is that alongside of these revolutionary developments, and reacting against them, was a movement just as widespread and many-sided in its operation which looked to the past as the solace and

## INTRODUCTION

the healer of the present difficulties rather than to the future. In religion it is fairly easy to see that the revival of Catholicism in England drew a good deal of its force from the definiteness of its answer to some of the problems that confronted the times. In politics there was a distinct slackening of the ardour for reform ten years after the passing of the Reform Bill. In literature, quite apart from Rossetti's circle, there is ample evidence of a turning away from the present to the past in the work of Tennyson and Browning. The Revolutionary spirit had for the moment spent itself, the present was obviously an unpoetic period, so that the poets turned naturally to that past which seemed most unlike their present, the middle age or that period which, because it was their "past", was the golden age to the mediaeval world itself.

What it was that prompted such a movement in the case of Tennyson and Browning is not very easily determined. Perhaps with the greatest poets it is as much instinct as reasoned intention that governs such choice; but with Rossetti in 1848 it was different. We know exactly the nature of his discontent and the reason for his return to the past. It has to be remembered that he was an artist, and that painting had in his day been dominated for the better part of three hundred years by the tradition of one man, Raphael. It had become so conventionalized as to be a fetter instead of a guide, to original genius, so that in his case the return to the past was an assertion of individual liberty.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were not the inventors of their title. It had been used in 1810 by certain German painters in Rome who felt that their art had become secularized, and even irreligious, under the influence of that side of the Renascence represented by Raphael. They were anxious to re-inspire it with the spirit of piety and devotion which had characterized it in the Middle Ages, and to this end they formed themselves into a kind



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

of religious order, withdrawing from the world, and devoting themselves to the beautifying of religious buildings.

While it would be utterly wrong to represent the group formed in 1848 as anti-religious, some of its members being conspicuous for their reverent piety, it was not the religion of the Middle Ages which attracted them, but its freedom from an overpowering tradition in art, its scope for individual originality, and its simplicity and directness,—in a word its naturalness. It was their aim and the aim of those who afterwards formed the Pre-Raphaelite School, to transfer to modern literature and painting these qualities, which they had lost or were in danger of losing.

In poetry their best work is undoubtedly that which in matter as well as in inspiration belongs to the mediaeval world. It was clear to them that the special qualities which they admired were as much absent from the literature as from the art of their day. It was also inevitable that they should select for treatment stories and situations of intense passionate interest, of love, and hate, and despair, because at these moments and in these circumstances human character reveals itself most unguardedly, and forgets the conventions. This is, of course, true of all poetry, but the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Rossetti and Morris, (perhaps because they were painters as well as poets) seem to have realized to a degree unequalled except by Keats, their professed master, and occasionally by Tennyson, the significance of dress and gesture and grouping as conveying the required impression. Perhaps the most remarkable instance of this producing of the necessary effect by the detailed picturing of external objects is to be found in Morris's *Haystack in the Floods*, but it is never wanting in the work of this group. *The Blessed Damsel* is full of it, and *The King's Tragedy* itself is a series of pictures *painted*, for again and again the emphasis is upon colour and form. The effect of this method of working is to give such prominence to details as

## INTRODUCTION

to endanger the impression which the whole should produce. There is no doubt that the Pre-Raphaelites excel in short poems, but in longer poems the effect is often obscured by the very vividness of the details.

Another characteristic common to the group is the mastery of musical verse; again and again the singing note of lyrical poetry comes into narrative and even dramatic pieces. With this quality goes a delicate sense for words, both for the association and the sound of them, a capacity to lift a forcible colloquial expression out of the prose-compelling environment of daily speech, and while retaining all its force and raciness, to give to it that atmosphere of the unfamiliar without which no word can be held suitable for great poetry. The whole question of vocabulary in poetry is a fascinating one, but all that can be said here is that neither Romance words, nor words of Old English stock, nor archaic expressions, are in themselves either specially poetic or unpoetic. The actual musical quality of each word is of some value, but still more the quality of the phrase, the environment as it were, in which it is used. But even more important for the poet is the association which any given word will call up *in the place in which he uses it*. This the Pre-Raphaelite poets almost invariably understood better than any other English poets except Shakespeare, Milton, and Tennyson.

After mentioning two great qualities, something must, in honesty, be said of their alleged "sensuousness." This adjective is especially applied to Rossetti, though no more applicable to him than to Morris, or Swinburne, or O'Shaughnessy. Half the people who use the word seem to convey by it a subtle slur, as though they would have wished to say "sensuality"; with such people's misuse of language we are not obliged to deal. But there are others who hold, and quite possibly rightly, that an excessive preoccupation with the external appearance of

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

things has weakened our perception of the effect aimed at. Gloriously beautiful as is *The Blessed Damsel*, we have a much clearer idea of her appearance than of her soul's longing. The poem is really a painting expressed in wonderful words. What it comes to is that this charge of sensuousness brought against Rossetti, as though it were a crime, is only critically valuable in so far as it is a repetition of what has been said about the excessively pictorial character of his poetry. All poetry, all art, is to some degree sensuous, and it is only a fault if it distracts the attention from the real aim of the poet.

I have already suggested that the Pre-Raphaelite movement was at least in one aspect of it an assertion of individuality. It was hardly possible that the members of the group and their literary children should always have respected the canons of current morality. Some of them did not, but they never made a real attack upon morals, and what seems to have escaped their accusers is that there is in all their work a very strong dramatic vein. The worst charge that can be sustained against Rossetti himself is that he saw the tragedy more clearly than the wrong-doing of erring love, and he certainly never advocated nor condoned, though he did pity, a breach of the moral law. And what is true of him is, speaking broadly, true of the whole School.

The most Pre-Raphaelite of Rossetti's own poems, and in some ways the most beautiful piece strongly characteristic of the group, is *The Blessed Damsel*, written in early youth and one of those compositions shown by Rossetti to Leigh Hunt. The metre is really an extension of the Ballad form, but may be described conveniently as a fourteener triplet, the long line being broken, as is usual, at the eighth syllable, but preserving something of its unity from the fact that there is no rhyme word until the end of the fourteener is reached.

The situation described is of a lover who has been

## INTRODUCTION

ten years in Heaven, but who still leans out over the rampart of God's House looking and waiting for the soul of her beloved. As she watches she describes to herself the places and the joys to which she will lead him, and the poem closes with a picture of her disappointment because he has not come. Interspersed between the pictures of her longing are a few lines describing his waiting for her, and fancied hearing of her voice.

It is not a story, it is a single situation, and its effect depends very largely upon our realizing the beauty as well as the forlornness of the Damsel. Her form and feature, the colour of her hair and clothes, the quality of her voice, the flowers that she carries, the golden bar against which she leans, are the setting, human enough, of an entirely human, passionate, unhappy Heaven. The Blessed Damsel is in fact as much imprisoned as Rapunzel, and the story is the old tale of separated love, rendered more poignant by the fact of having survived death. To say this is in no sense to depreciate the poem, but only to emphasize its essentially Pre-Raphaelite character. Nothing could be more typical of the movement than the theme of the unhappiness of undying love. Perhaps the gravest charge which can with any justice be brought against the Pre-Raphaelites is their almost morbid dwelling upon the beauty-glory of transitory things which pass away long before the desire for them has ceased.

### THE BALLAD

*The King's Tragedy* forms one of a group of Ballads. Some have held that it is the most characteristic of Rossetti's poems. It was written only a short time before it was published in 1881. It belongs to a class of poem very popular in the nineteenth century, of which *The Ancient Mariner* is an obvious example.

The origin of the Ballad is shrouded in mystery, which is only another way of saying that there are many

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

conflicting theories about it. The earliest English Ballads appear to belong to about the fourteenth century, but the subject matter of some of them is held quite plausibly to be primeval, and on this ground some writers have claimed for them a hoary antiquity, at least in some shape, which one would willingly acknowledge if only there were substantial evidence to support it. But a ballad is a specific art form, of which no trace can or could be found in pre-historic ages. It is possible that the neolithic man had some of the stories which we possess in ballad form, but it is asking a great deal of us to believe that he must have had them in that form, or indeed in any special form whatever. It will be seen, then, that the form of the ballad can in some cases, and even must, be separated from the matter, but in others the matter can be easily dated, and in such instances the natural presumption is that the ballad is more or less contemporary with the events described.

It so happens that the great period of the English Ballad judged by this test is the fifteenth century. But there were some ballads which related matters not belonging to that period, such as the adventures of Robin Hood, or tales of King Arthur and some of his knights. On this fact was built up a theory that the Ballad represents the original source of the great Romance Cycles. There is, however, one grave difficulty in the way of this theory, namely that the heroes of the romantic ballads are not the heroes of the romances, and indeed do not in some cases appear in them at all. Now it is easy to explain how a minor character in an old story may become a principal actor in a new one, but it is not easy to explain how a principal character in an old story should be entirely lost sight of when that story is absorbed into another.

It was this which caused the third explanation of the existence, or sudden emergence, of the ballad to be put forward by Professor Gregory Smith in his book *The*

## INTRODUCTION

*Transition Period*, where the whole question is discussed. He holds that the relation of the romance ballads to the romances, and the fact that a very large number of ballads can be dated by their contents as belonging to about the fifteenth century, together suggest that the rise of the ballad was in part due to the waning popularity of the long metrical Romances to which Chaucer bears testimony by his caricature of them in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and Malory by his condensation and putting into prose of the story of Arthur. The fifteenth century was an age in which clear evidences are traceable of the desire for brevity in literature,—one obvious instance is the comparative length of the morality and the miracle cycle, intensified by the development of the interlude. If this is borne in mind, the simplicity of the old ballads will appear to be not the artless *naïveté* of a rustic form, but the studied effect of a conscious art.

The metre of the ballad seems to support this theory in a remarkable way. The typical stanza of the rhymed romances is generally called 'Romance Six'. It consists of a group of three octosyllabic lines followed by one six-syllabled line, and again another group of three lines followed by one, of the same syllabic values as the first group. The short lines rhyme together, and in many cases all the long lines have the same rhyme. But sometimes each group of three has a separate rhyme. The rhyme-scheme may be represented thus *aaab aaab*, or *aaab cccb*. But quite frequently the number of long lines varied, so that we get such arrangements as *aaabccb* or *aabab*, amongst others. It seems fairly clear (i) that the short lines were always two; (ii) that the long lines might vary considerably in number. Now this is precisely the condition of ballad metre. Ordinarily it consists of four lines of which the first and third are octosyllabic, and the second and fourth six-syllabled, but it has always been allowable to add to the number of long lines, and Rossetti

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

occasionally even adds to the short ones by a natural extension of this *licence*. Now if this obvious similarity between Romance Six and Ballad Measure aids any theory, it is the last, for if we grant the connection between them, it is quite clear that the standard pattern of Ballad Measure is a simplification of normal Romance Six.

A "ballad" is generally recognized to be a narrative poem either of some contemporary event of a nature calculated to make a strong emotional appeal, or of some past or imaginary happening possessing this quality. It is necessary to the form that the narrative should be simple and direct and full of detail, that it should, as far as possible, preserve the appearance of an unvarnished tale, told as by an eye-witness.

As has been already stated, the great period of the ballad was the fifteenth century. It was, however, a very popular form in the sixteenth century, when it became the medium for recording striking and sensational events of every kind. In passing, it may be noted that the ballads of the sixteenth century, undoubtedly "popular" productions, are so decidedly inferior to those of the earlier period as to afford strong support to the theory that these were the work of conscious artists definitely striving after the effect of simplicity. In the seventeenth century the energy which had gone into ballad making was in part diverted to the production of metrical versions of the Psalms of David, a labour indicative of piety rather than of literary gifts. But in the eighteenth century the revival of interest in the old ballad literature, exemplified by the publication of Bishop Percy's *Reliques*, led to imitation on a large scale. Since then, the majority of the poets of the nineteenth century have left something in this kind, sometimes pseudo-archaic, but sometimes a definitely modern rendering of the form.

As a ballad there is little left to be said of *The King's Tragedy*, it possesses all the characteristics in story and

## INTRODUCTION

treatment belonging to the form. It has a slight flavour of archaism in vocabulary which fits well with the character of the tale. Metrically it makes full use of the *licences* permitted by recognized convention, and in this case Rossetti's carelessness about rhyme has a positive æsthetic advantage.

There is in every good ballad a certain lyrical element, a direct expression of emotion, as well as an indirect appeal to the feeling of others, and this is no exception. The dominant feeling is that of intense loyalty of that personal character which it was both the glory and the misfortune of the Stuart House to evoke more intensely than any other family in our history. As the corollary of this loyalty there is the fierce hatred of the murderers which finds its most complete expression in the entire identification of herself with the feelings of the widowed Queen shown by Catherine Douglas in the note of exultation with which she refers to the fate of the murderers. But there is more than the loyalty of a subject, even a subject of the Stuarts, there is also the love of a friend, the Queen's friend, which dwells with minute recollection upon the love and happiness of the Royal lovers.

The story is told by Rossetti with remarkable fidelity to the facts of history, it needed no poetic embellishment to enhance its passion and its Tragedy. King James, the greater part of whose reign had been spent in captivity in England, had found his Queen among the ladies of the English Court, and for her sake he had written the greatest poem in mediæval Scottish literature. The long absence of the King had caused the power of the nobles to increase to a dangerous degree, and it was James's policy to lessen it by every means in his power. Many of his acts were a straining of the Royal prerogative, and in other cases he was not sufficiently careful to satisfy popular opinion of their justice. It was, therefore, inevitable that a conflict should occur between him and his nobles. At first



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

they tried to beard him in his own Parliament, but this proving abortive and leading to the arrest of Sir Robert Graham more furtive methods were employed. The story of what happened in the Carthusian monastery at Perth is taken from an almost contemporary document and is represented with complete fidelity by Rossetti. Unfortunately, however, the most romantic incident of all, the heroic act of Catherine Douglas, does not rest on this authority, and it is, therefore, impossible not to doubt it, though in itself there is nothing impossible in it as the Stuart House have called forth even greater acts of loyalty.

The picture of King James himself in the poem is just such a one as we would expect from the teller of the tale. It bears a close resemblance to the impression of him gained from history, though it is naturally a favourable picture. The King was a big, handsome man, possessed of extraordinary physical strength and, like the rest of his family, absolutely fearless. He was of a highly chivalrous temper, a loyal son of the Church, certain abuses in which he was most anxious to see reformed, and for which purpose he founded the Carthusian house in Perth. He took very seriously his responsibility as the protector of the poor, and partly on this ground but partly also because of a certain autocratic temper characteristic of his family, he was determined to break the power of the nobles. It has been already said that, being content with the justice of his aim, he was more careless than prudent as to the methods by which he attained it. It would have been quite possible for some of the nobles to regard his murder as no more unscrupulous than the fate meted out to their relatives. Apart from this, the King was separated from his nobles by a wide gulf of culture. He was a poet, and one of the most accomplished men of his age, his nobles were still at that stage in the development of the state when they exacted to the full the loyalties due to themselves but felt very lightly their duty

## INTRODUCTION

to the King. It was a barbarous age in which barbarous deeds were done and barbarous revenges taken. It must be remembered that in this poem the whole of the King's character is suffused and transfigured by his love for his beautiful Queen, which it is pleasant to think is no exaggeration of history.

The character of the Queen is not so clearly drawn as her husband's, and the whole story moves round her, and it is she who brings it to its final terrible close. Her beauty, her love, her premonitory fears, her natural gentle graciousness, are only the background against which stand out the two great pictures of her, first where she faces the threats and insults of the traitors and by her bearing arouses some kind of chivalry in the mind of the Graham's son, and afterwards when we watch her kneeling day by day by her dead husband, waiting silently till news came, and then whispering it into his dead ear.

*"James, James, they suffered more!"*

The Queen's vengeance let none of them escape and she saw to it that their deaths were not easy. But Rossetti has rightly given no details of that dire vengeance, we are left to contemplate the far more impressive picture of the silent, desolate Queen awaiting its fulfilment by the side of the unburied corpse.

Already James's poem *The King's Quhair* has been referred to, and something is also said about it in the Notes to this edition (see the 'note' on line 316). Rossetti has introduced into *The King's Tragedy* an adaptation of some of its verses. Some controversy has arisen on this point, it being sometimes held that because Rossetti's version is undoubtedly inferior to the King's it was an impropriety amounting almost to vandalism to mangle the original in order to decorate his ballad. But is not this kind of criticism a little unfair to Rossetti? He must have known that his version could not compare with the original, why then

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

did he allow it to remain? Surely the singing of the song of their courtship, leading up as it does to the picture of that moment of supreme happiness in love when the king stood up and kissed his queen with the full ardour of his love is intended by the force of its contrast to add pathos and tragedy to all that follows. Rossetti might, no doubt, have devised some other way of producing the desired contrast, but as the poem stands it would be impossible to remove the singing of the King's love-song, and indeed it is difficult to see how the dramatic effect aimed at could otherwise be produced.

Much has already been said in general of the Pre-Raphaelite School, and in particular of the work of Rossetti, about word-pictures and painting. *The King's Tragedy* is an example of this characteristic, presenting as it does a series of vivid pictures: the scene of the first meeting with the woman by the shore of the Firth of Forth, or of the feast in the hall, or of the King's singing of his own poem, or of the scene of the King's murder, or of the Queen's waiting for news, are sufficient to mention. This may suffice as a specimen:

But the song's end was all of his love,  
And well his heart was grac'd  
With her smiling lips and her tear-bright eyes  
As his arm went round her waist.

And on the swell of her long fair throat  
Close clung the necklet-chain  
As he bent her pearl—tired head aside,  
And in the warmth of his love and pride  
He kissed her lips full fain.

And her true face was a rosy red,  
The very red of the rose  
That, couched on the happy garden-bed,  
In the summer sunlight glows.

## INTRODUCTION

And all the wondrous things of love  
That sang so sweet through the song  
Were in the look that met in their eyes,  
And the look was deep and long.

If this passage is examined, it will be found that what distinguishes it from other descriptions is that each act and circumstance mentioned is significant. Strictly it is not so much a picture of the King and Queen as of their love; the description is limited to the outward expression of that love. Yet this kind of concentration upon that which is significant produces on the mind a far clearer picture than would be presented by a much more detailed description in what may be called the catalogue manner.

Rossetti is not a nature poet, yet it must be put down to the fact that he was almost entirely a town-dweller that he was not. Scattered up and down through his writings are evidences that he could observe accurately and minutely. It is true that Nature is with him always a background to his human actors, but so it is with Wordsworth, only with Wordsworth the human actor is so frequently himself, or mankind in general. Natural description is not plentiful in *The King's Tragedy*, but it is very effective where it occurs. The most noticeable places in the poem when it occurs are in the places where we meet the prophetic woman. Each feature selected for description is significant of the mood of foreboding which the poet wishes to create. But though these touches of scenery are not introduced for their own sake, they are nevertheless true and vividly portrayed. It should not be counted as a fault in any poet that he has not written a particular kind of poetry, nor is Nature poetry an especially exalted expression of the art. After all, the main subject of all poetry is Man, and the description of Nature out of any relation to man is hardly poetry.

There remains to be considered the use of the Super-

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

natural in the poem. The Highland woman who appears twice in the poem was an historical person possessed of that strange gift of "second sight" which is one of the best authenticated of unexplained psychic phenomena. It is not "common" among the Celtic peoples in the sense that many persons possess it, but it is well known to exist, and many people have come into contact with it, including the present writer. It may be noted in passing that no one who possesses this strange gift was ever known to desire it or to exercise it voluntarily; it has nothing whatever to do with "spiritualism", or "witchcraft" or any sort of trafficking with the spirit world.

What is said by the woman to the King on the shore of the Firth of Forth is a fairly close reproduction of the ancient account, the narrative of her interview with him at Perth ends historically with her being turned away at the gate. But Rossetti is justified in bringing her to the outside of the King's bed-chamber, because of the effect which her presence produces on the reader. It should be noticed that on neither occasion is it what the seeress says that impresses us so much as the setting of her speech and the weird, mysterious, hinting language in which it is clothed. The real value of the supernatural episodes in the poem is that they supply an element of mystery, an impression of something at work which we cannot understand, and therefore are helpless to contend with. Were these passages cut out of the poem, much of the tragedy as well as of the poetry would be lost with them. But I would repeat that it is not the description of the King's wraith or of the death-tree alone, or even mainly, which produces the special effect in each passage, the one certainly does, and the other is intended to produce a feeling of horror; but the specific aim of the passages is to create and deepen a spirit of foreboding. This impression here, as everywhere whether in literature or life, is dependent very largely on external conditions,

## INTRODUCTION

especially disturbances in nature such as storms. It is the setting of the seeress's message on each occasion which makes it really impressive.

When one attempts to place *The King's Tragedy* among Rossetti's poems, one is faced by the initial difficulty that there is really no consensus of opinion on the subject. A really great authority like Walter Pater speaks of the ballad as the most typical of Rossetti's poems, not, be it observed, as the greatest. Had he claimed for it the first place it would have been a simple matter to brush aside his opinion as a momentary aberration. But there is nobody more competent than he to speak of what is characteristic in an author or painter.

On the other hand a critic of the standing of the Master of Magdalen College, Cambridge, having this dictum before him, definitely rejects it on the ground that Rossetti's imagination is fettered by his conscientious adherence to historical fact, which can hardly be claimed as typical of his work. With this I am inclined to agree, yet in what sense did Pater mean us to take his criticism?

It is, of course, obvious that in *The King's Tragedy* we have an excellent example of all the most characteristic features of Rossetti's work: his music, his vocabulary, his peculiarities of rhyme, his picture painting, his exaltation of love, his fascinated use of the supernatural, his feeling of the tragedy of life. If Pater meant that a catalogue of this kind could be made from the poem he is right, but he is not very profound, and merely superficial remarks are not in his manner. It would seem that he did not feel the clogging weight of an original upon which Rossetti had to work, and if he missed it others may well do the same.

As a ballad, *The King's Tragedy* is an excellent example of a revival of an old verse form, but it clearly does not aim at preserving that conspicuous simplicity which was one of the marked characteristics of the old

## *THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

ballad. It is, in reality, a most elaborate piece of work, and one of its greatest merits is that it sustains throughout a uniformly high standard of achievement. It does not aim at a close analysis of character, but at the emotional presentation of a stirring tale of tragedy in love. The highest praise that we can give to it is what is really the highest praise that can be given to any work of art, namely, that it has fully accomplished what it set out to do.

---

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY





# THE KING'S TRAGEDY

JAMES I OF SCOTS

*20th February, 1437.*

---

I Catherine am a Douglas born,  
A name to all Scots'dear ;  
And Kate Barlass they 've called me now  
Through many a waning year.  
This old arm's withered now. 'Twas once 5  
Most deft 'mong maidens all  
To rein the steed, to wing the shaft,  
To smite the palm-play ball.  
In hall adown the close-linked dance  
It has shone most white/and fair ; 10  
It has been the rest for a true lord's head,  
And many a sweet babe's nursing bed,  
And the bar to a King's chambère.  
Aye, lasses, draw round Kate Barlass,  
And hark with bated breath 15  
How good King James, King Robert's son,  
Was foully done to death.

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

Through all the days of his gallant youth  
The princely James was pent,  
By his friends at first and then by his foes 20  
In long imprisonment.

For the elder Prince, the kingdom's heir,  
By treason's murderous brood  
Was slain, and the father quaked for the child 25  
With the royal mortal blood.

I' the Bass Rock fort, by his father's care,  
Was his childhood's life assured ;  
And Henry the subtle Bolingbroke,  
Proud England's King, 'neath the southron yoke  
His youth for long years immured. 30

Yet in all things meet for a kingly man  
Himself did he approve ;  
And the nightingale through his prison-wall  
Taught him both lore and love.

For once, when the bird's song drew him close 35  
To the opened window-pane,  
In her bowers beneath a lady stood,  
A light of life to his sorrowful mood,  
Like a lily amid the rain.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And for her sake, to the sweet bird's note,           40  
    He framed a sweeter Song,  
More sweet than ever a poet's heart  
    Gave yet to the English tongue.

She was a lady of royal blood ;  
    And when, past sorrow and teen,                   45  
He stood where still through his crownless years  
    His Scottish realm had been,  
At Scone were the happy lovers crowned,  
    A heart-wed King and Queen.

But the bird may fall from the bough of youth, 50  
    And song be turned to moan,  
And Love's storm-cloud be the shadow of Hate,  
When the tempest-waves of a troubled State  
    Are beating against a throne.

Yet well they loved ; and the god of love,           55  
    Whom well the King had sung,  
Might find on the earth no truer hearts  
    His lowliest swains among.

From the days when first she rode abroad  
    With Scottish maids in her train,                   60  
I Catherine Douglas won the trust  
    Of my mistress sweet Queen Jane.

## *THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And oft she sighed, "To be born a King!"  
And oft along the way  
When she saw the homely lovers pass  
She has said, "Alack the day!" 65

Years waned,—the loving and toiling years:  
Till England's wrong renewed  
Drove James, by outrage cast on his crown,  
To the open field of feud. 70

'Twas when the King and his host were met  
At the leaguer of Roxbro' hold,  
The Queen o' the sudden sought his camp  
With a tale of dread to be told.

And she showed him a secret letter writ 75  
That spoke of treasonous strife,  
And how a band of his noblest lords  
Were sworn to take his life.

"And it may be here or it may be there,  
In the camp or the court," she said: 80  
"But for my sake come to your people's arms  
And guard your royal head."

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

Quoth he, " 'Tis the fifteenth day of the siege,  
· And the castle's nigh to yield."  
" O face your foes on your throne," she cried; 85  
" And show the power you wield;  
And under your Scottish people's love  
You shall sit as under your shield."  
At the fair Queen's side I stood that day  
When he bade them raise the siege, 90  
And back to his Court he sped to know  
How the lords would meet their Liege.  
But when he summoned his Parliament,  
The louring brows hung round,  
Like clouds that circle the mountain-head 95  
Ere the first low thunders sound.  
For he had tamed the nobles' lust  
And curbed their power and pride,  
And reached out an arm to right the poor  
Through Scotland far and wide; 100  
And many a lordly wrong-doer  
By the headsman's axe had died.  
'Twas then upspoke Sir Robert Graeme,  
The bold o'ermastering man:—  
" O King, in the name of your Three Estates 105  
I set you under their ban!

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

“ For, as your lords made oath to you  
Of service and fealty,  
Even in like wise you pledged your oath  
Their faithful sire to be :— 110

“ Yet all we here that are nobly sprung  
Have mourned dear kith and kin  
Since first for the Scottish Barons' curse  
Did your bloody rule begin.”

With that he laid his hands on his King :— 115  
“ Is this not so, my lords ? ”  
But of all who had sworn to league with him  
Not one spake back to his words.

Quoth the King :—“ Thou speak'st but for one  
Nor doth it avow thy gage. [Estate, 120  
Let my liege lords hale this traitor hence ! ”  
The Graeme fired dark with rage :—  
“ Who works for lesser men than himself,  
He earns but a witless wage ! ”

But soon from the dungeon where he lay 125  
He won by privy plots,  
And forth he fled with a price on his head  
To the country of the Wild Scots.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And word there came from Sir Robert Graeme  
To the King at Edinbro' :— 130

“ No Liege of mine thou art ; but I see  
From this day forth alone in thee  
God's creature, my mortal foe.

“ Through thee are my wife and children lost,  
My heritage and lands ; 135  
And when my God shall show me a way,  
Thyself my mortal foe will I slay  
With these my proper hands.”

Against the coming of Christmastide  
That year the King bade call 140  
I' the Black Friars' Charterhouse of Perth  
A solemn festival.

And we of his household rode with him  
In a close-ranked company ;  
But not till the sun had sunk from his throne 145  
Did we reach the Scottish Sea.

That eve was clenched for a boding storm,  
'Neath a toilsome moon half seen ;  
The cloud stooped low and the surf rose high ;  
And where there was a line of the sky, 150  
Wild wings loomed dark between.



*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And on a rock of the black beach-side,  
By the veiled moon dimly lit,  
There was something seemed to heave with life  
As the King drew nigh to it. 155

And was it only the tossing furze  
Or brake of the waste sea-wold ?  
Or was it an eagle bent to the blast ?  
When near we came, we knew it at last  
For a woman tattered and old. 160

But it seemed as though by a fire within  
Her writhen limbs were wrung ;  
And as soon as the King was close to her,  
She stood up gaunt and strong.

'Twas then the moon sailed clear of the rack 165  
On high in her hollow dome ;  
And still as aloft with hoary crest  
Each clamorous wave rang home,  
Like fire in snow the moonlight blazed  
Amid the champing foam. 170

And the woman held his eyes with her eyes :—  
“ O King, thou art come at last ;  
But thy wraith has haunted the Scottish Sea,  
To my sight for four years past.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

“ Four years it is since first I met, 175  
    ‘Twixt the Duchray and the Dhu,  
A shape whose feet clung close in a shroud,  
    And that shape for thine I knew.

“ A year again, and on Inchkeith Isle  
    I saw thee pass in the breeze, 180  
With the cerecloth risen above thy feet  
    And wound about thy knees.

“ And yet a year, in the Links of Forth,  
    As a wanderer without rest,  
Thou cam'st with both thine arms i'the shroud  
    That clung high up thy breast.

“ And in this hour I find thee here,  
    And well mine eyes may note  
That the winding-sheet hath passed thy breast  
    And risen around thy throat. 190

“ And when I meet thee again, O King,  
    That of death hast such sore drouth,—  
Except thou turn again on this shore,—  
The winding-sheet shall have moyed once more  
    And covered thine eyes and mouth. 195

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

“ O King, whom poor men bless for their King,  
Of thy fate be not so fain ;  
But these my words for God's message take,  
And turn thy steed, O King, for her sake  
Who rides beside thy rein ! ” 200

While the woman spoke, the King's horse reared  
As if it would breast the sea,  
And the Queen turned pale as she heard on the gale  
The voice die dolorously.

When the woman ceased, the steed was still, 205  
But the King gazed on her yet,  
And in silence save for the wail of the sea  
His eyes and her eyes met.

At last he said :—“ God's ways are His own ;  
Man is but shadow and dust. 210  
Last night I prayed by His altar-stone ;  
To-night I wend to the Feast of His Son ;  
And in Him I set my trust.

“ I have held my people in sacred charge,  
And have not feared the sting, 215  
Of proud men's hate,—to His will resign'd  
Who has but one same death for a hind  
And one same death for a King.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

“ And if God in His wisdom have brought close  
The day when I must die, 220

That day by water or fire or air  
My feet shall fall in the destined snare  
Wherever my road may lie.

“ What man can say but the Fiend hath set  
Thy sorcery on my path, 225  
My heart with the fear of death to fill,  
And turn me against God's very will  
To sink in his burning wrath? ”

The woman stood as the train rode past,  
And moved nor limb nor eye ; 230  
And when we were shipped, we saw her there  
Still standing against the sky.

As the ship made way, the moon once more  
Sank slow in her rising pall ;  
And I thought of the shrouded wraith of the King,,  
And I said, “ The Heavens know all.”

And now, ye lasses, must ye hear  
How my name is Kate Barlass :—  
But a little thing, when all the tale  
Is told of the weary mass 240  
Of crime and woe which in Scotland's realm  
God's will let come to pass.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

'Twas in the Charterhouse of Perth  
That the King and all his Court  
Were met, the Christmas Feast being done, 245  
For solace and disport.

'Twas a wind-wild eve in February,  
And against the casement-pane  
The branches smote like summoning hands  
And muttered the driving rain. 250

And when the wind swooped over the lift  
And made the whole heaven frown,  
It seemed a grip was laid on the walls  
To tug the housetop down.

And the Queen was there, more stately fair 255  
Than a lily in garden set ;  
And the King was loth to stir from her side ;  
For as on the day when she was his bride,  
Even so he loved her yet.

And the Earl of Athole, the King's false friend,  
' Sat with him at the board ;  
And Robert Stuart the chamberlain  
Who had sold his sovereign Lord.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

Yet the traitor Christopher Chaumber there  
Would fain have told him all, 265  
And vainly four times that night he strove  
To reach the King through the hall.

But the wine is bright at the goblet's brim  
Though the poison lurk beneath ;  
And the apples still are red on the tree 270  
Within whose shade may the adder be  
That shall turn thy life to death.

There was a knight of the King's fast friends  
Whom he called the King of Love ;  
And to such bright cheer and courtesy 275  
That name might best behave.

And the King and Queen both loved him well  
For his gentle knightliness;  
And with him the King, as that eve wore on,  
Was playing at the chess. 280

And the King said, (for he thought to jest  
And soothe the Queen thereby)—  
“In a book 'tis writ that this same year  
A King shall in Scotland die.



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

Then he smiled the smile I knew so well  
When he thought to please the Queen ;  
The smile which under all bitter frowns  
Of fate that rose between,  
For ever dwelt at the poet's heart 310  
Like the bird of love unseen.

And he kissed her hand and took his harp,  
And the music sweetly rang ;  
And when the song burst forth, it seemed  
'Twas the nightingale that sang. 315

*" Worship, ye lovers, on this May :  
Of bliss your kalends are begun :  
Sing with us, Away, Winter, away !  
Come, Summer, the sweet season and sun !  
Awake for shame,—your heaven is won,— 320  
And amorously your heads lift all :  
Thank Love, that you to his grace doth call ! "*

But when he bent to the Queen, and sang  
The speech whose praise was hers,  
It seemed his voice was the voice of the Spring 325  
And the voice of the bygone years.



THE KING'S TRAGEDY

*"The fairest and the freshest flower  
That ever I saw before that hour,  
The which o' the sudden made to start  
The blood of my body to my heart.* 330

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

*Ah sweet, are ye a worldly creature  
Or heavenly thing in form of nature?"*

And the song was long, and richly stored  
With wonder and beauteous things ;  
And the harp was tuned to every change 335  
Of minstrel ministerings ;  
But when he spoke of the Queen at the last,  
Its strings were his own heart-strings.

*"Unworthy but only of her grace,  
Upon Love's rock that's easy and sure, 340  
In guerdon of all my love's space  
She took me her humble creature.  
Thus fell my blissful adventure  
In youth of love that from day to day  
Flowereth aye new, and further I say. 345*

*"To reckon all the circumstance  
As it happed when lessen gan my sore,  
Of my rancour and woful chance,  
It were too long,—I have done therefor.*

THE KING'S TRAGEDY

*And of this flower I say no more* 350  
*But unto my help her heart hath tended*  
*And even from death her man defended."*

"Aye, even from death," to myself I said ;  
For I thought of the day when she  
Had borne him the news, at Roxbro' siege, 355  
Of the fell confederacy.

But Death even then took aim as he sang  
With an arrow deadly bright ;  
And the grinning skull lurked grimly aloof  
And the wings were spread far over the roof 360  
More dark than the winter night.

Yet truly along the amorous song  
Of Love's high pomp and state,  
There were words of Fortune's trackless doom  
And the dreadful face of Fate. 365

And oft have I heard again in dreams  
The voice of dire appeal  
In which the King then sang of the pit  
That is under Fortune's wheel.

THE KING'S TRAGEDY

- " And under the wheel beheld I there* 370  
*An ugly Pit as deep as hell,*  
*That to behold I quaked for fear :*  
*And this I heard, that who therein fell*  
*Came no more up, tidings to tell :*  
*Whereat, astound of the fearful sight,* 375  
*I wist not what to do for fright."*
- And oft has my thought called up again  
These words of the changeful song :—  
*" Wist thou thy pain and thy travail*  
*To come, well might'st thou weep and wail!"* 380  
And our wail, O God ! is long.
- But the song's end was all of his love ;  
And well his heart was grac'd  
With her smiling lips and her tear-bright eyes  
As his arm went round her waist. 385
- And on the swell of her long fair throat  
Close clung the necklet-chain  
As he bent her pearl-tir'd head aside,  
And in the warmth of his love and pride  
He kissed her lips full fain. 390
- And her true face was a rosy red,  
The very red of the rose  
That, couched on the happy garden-bed,  
In the summer sunlight glows.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And all the wondrous things of love 395

That sang so sweet through the song  
Were in the look that met in their eyes,  
And the look was deep and long.

'Twas then a knock came at the outer gate,  
And the usher sought the King. 400

"The woman you met by the Scottish Sea,  
My Liege, would tell you a thing;  
And she says that her present need for speech  
Will bear no gainsaying."

And the King said: "The hour is late;  
To-morrow will serve, I ween." 405

Then he charged the usher strictly, and said:  
"No word of this to the Queen."

But the usher came again to the King.  
"Shall I call her back?" quoth he: 410

"For as she went on her way, she cried,  
'Woe! Woe! then the thing must be!'"

And the King paused, but he did not speak.

Then he called for the Voidee-cup:  
And as we heard the twelfth hour strike, 415

There by true lips and false lips alike  
Was the draught of trust drained up.

## *THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

So with reverence meet to King and Queen,  
To bed went all from the board ;  
And the last to leave of the courtly train      420  
Was Robert Stuart the chamberlain  
Who had sold his sovereign lord.

And all the locks of the chamber-door  
Had the traitor riven and brast :  
And that Fate might win sure way from afar,      425  
He had drawn out every bolt and bar  
That made the entrance fast.

And now at midnight he stole his way  
To the moat of the outer wall,  
And laid strong hurdles closely across      430  
Where the traitors' tread should fall.

But we that were the Queen's bower-maids  
Alone were left behind ;  
And with heed we drew the curtains close  
Against the winter wind.      435

And now that all was still through the hall,  
-More clearly we heard the rain  
That clamoured ever against the glass  
And the boughs that beat on the pane.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

But the fire was bright in the ingle-nook,                    440  
And through empty space around  
The shadows cast on the arras'd wall  
'Mid the pictured kings stood sudden and tall  
Like spectres sprung from the ground.  
And the bed was dight in a deep alcove ;                    445  
And as he stood by the fire  
The King was still in talk with the Queen  
While he doffed his goodly attire.  
And the song had brought the image back  
Of many a bygone year ;                    450  
And many a loving word they said  
With hand in hand and head laid to head ;  
And none of us went anear.  
But Love was weeping outside the house,  
A child in the piteous rain ;                    455  
And as he watched the arrow of Death,  
He wailed for his own shafts close in the sheath  
That never should fly again.  
And now beneath the window arose  
A wild voice suddenly :                    460  
And the King reared straight, but the Queen fell  
As for bitter dule to dree ;                    [back  
And all of us knew the woman's voice  
'Who spoke by the Scottish Sea.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

"O King," she cried, "in an evil hour                   465  
    They drove me from thy gate ;  
And yet my voice must rise to thine ears ;  
    But alas ! it comes too late !

"Last night at mid-watch, by Aberdour,  
    When the moon was dead in the skies,                   470  
O King, in a death-light of thine own  
    I saw thy shape arise.

"And in full season, as erst I said,  
    The doom had gained its growth ;  
    And the shroud had risen above thy neck                   475  
    And covered thine eyes and mouth.

"And no moon woke, but the pale dawn broke,  
    And still thy soul stood there ;  
And I thought its silence cried to my soul  
    As the first rays crowned its hair.                   480

"Since then have I journeyed fast and fain  
    In very despite of Fate,  
Lest Hope might still be found in God's will ;  
    But they drove me from thy gate.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

“ For every man on God's ground, O King,      485  
His death grows up from his birth  
In a shadow-plant perpetually ;  
And thine towers high, a black yew-tree,  
O'er the Charterhouse of Perth ! ”

That room was built far out from the house ;      490  
And none but we in the room  
Might hear the voice that rose beneath,  
Nor the tread of the coming doom.

For now there came a torchlight-glare,  
And a clang of arms there came ;      495  
And not a soul in that space but thought  
Of the foe Sir Robert Græme.

Yea, from the country of the Wild Scots,  
O'er mountain, valley, and glen,  
He had brought with him in murderous league 500  
Three hundred armed men.

The King knew all in an instant's flash ;  
And like a King did he stand ;  
But there was no armour in all the room,  
Nor weapon lay to his hand.      505



*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And all we women flew to the door  
And thought to have made it fast ;  
But the bolts were gone and the bars were gone  
And the locks were riven and brast.  
And he caught the pale pale Queen in his arms 510  
As the iron footsteps fell,—  
Then loosed her, standing alone, and said,  
“ Our bliss was our farewell ! ”  
And 'twixt his lips he murmured a prayer,  
And he crossed his brow and breast ; 515  
And proudly in royal hardihood  
Even so with folded arms he stood,—  
The prize of the bloody quest.  
Then on me leaped the Queen like a deer :—  
“ O Catherine, help ! ” she cried. 520  
And low at his feet we clasped his knees  
Together side by side.  
“ Oh ! even a King, for his people's sake,  
From treasonous death must hide ! ”  
“ For *her* sake most ! ” I cried, and I marked 525  
The pang that my words could wring.  
And the iron tongs from the chimney-nook  
I snatched and held to the King :—  
“ Wrench up the plank ! and the vault beneath  
Shall yield safe harbouring.” 530

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

With brows low-bent, from my eager hand  
• The heavy heft did he take;  
And the plank at his feet he wrenched and tore;  
And as he frowned through the open floor,  
Again I said, "For her sake!" 535

Then he cried to the Queen, "God's will be done!"  
For her hands were clasped in prayer.  
And down he sprang to the inner crypt;  
And straight we closed the plank he had ripp'd  
And toiled to smoothe it fair. 540

(Alas! in that vault a gap once was  
• Where thro' the King might have fled:  
But three days since close-walled had it been  
By his will; for the ball would roll therein  
When without at the palm he play'd). 545

Then the Queen cried, "Catherine, keep the door,  
And I to this will suffice!"  
At her word I rose all dazed to my feet,  
And my heart was fire and ice.

And louder ever the voices grew, 550  
And the tramp of men in mail;  
Until to my brain it seemed to be  
As though I tossed on a ship at sea  
In the teeth of a crashing gale.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

Then back I flew to the rest ; and hard 555

We strove with sinews knit

To force the table against the door ;

But we might not compass it.

Then my wild gaze sped far down the hall

To the place of the hearthstone-sill ; 560

And the Queen bent ever above the floor,

For the plank was rising still.

And now the rush was heard on the stair,

And " God, what help ? " was our cry.

And was I frenzied or was I bold ? 565

I looked at each empty stanchion-hold,

And no bar but my arm had I !

Like iron felt my arm, as through

The staple I made it pass :—

Alack ! it was flesh and bone—no more ! 570

'Twas Catherine Douglas sprang to the door,

But I fell back Kate Barlass.

With that they all thronged into the hall,

Half dim to my failing ken ;

And the space that was but a void before 575

Was a crowd of wrathful men.

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

Behind the door I had fall'n and lay,  
Yet my sense was wildly aware,  
And for all the pain of my shattered arm  
I never fainted there. 580

Even as I fell, my eyes were cast  
Where the King leaped down to the pit ;  
And lo ! the plank was smooth in its place,  
And the Queen stood far from it.

And under the litters and through the bed 585  
And within the presses all  
The traitors sought for the King, and pierced  
The arras around the wall,

And through the chamber they ramped and  
Like lions loose in the lair, [stormed  
And scarce could trust to their very eyes,—  
For behold ! no King was there.

Then one of them seized the Queen, and cried,—  
“ Now tell us, where is thy lord ? ”  
And he held the sharp point over her heart : 595  
She drooped not her eyes nor did she start,  
But she answered never a word.

THE KING'S TRAGEDY

Then the sword half pierced the true true breast :

But it was the Graeme's own son

Cried, " This is a woman,—we seek a man ! " 600

And away from her girdle-zone

He struck the point of the murderous steel ;

And that foul deed was not done.

And forth flowed all the throng like a sea,

And 'twas empty space once more ; 605

And my eyes sought out the wounded Queen

As I lay behind the door.

And I said : " Dear Lady, leave me here,

For I cannot help you now ;

But fly while you may, and none shall reck 610

Of my place here lying low."

And she said, " My Catherine, God help thee ! "

Then she looked to the distant floor,

And clasping her hands, " O God help *him*,"

She sobbed, " for we can no more ! " 615

But God He knows what help may mean,

If it mean to live or to die ;

And what sore sorrow and mighty moan

On earth it may cost ere yet a throne

Be filled in His house on high. 620

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And now the ladies fled with the Queen ;  
And through the open door  
The night-wind wailed round the empty room  
And the rushes shook on the floor.

And the bed dropped low in the dark recess 625  
Whence the arras was rent away ;  
And the firelight still shone over the space  
Where our hidden secret lay.

And the rain had ceased, and the moonbeams lit  
The window high in the wall,— 630  
Bright beams that on the plank that I knew  
Through the painted pane did fall  
And gleamed with the splendour of Scotland's crown  
And shield armorial.

But then a great wind swept up the skies, 635  
And the climbing moon fell back ;  
And the royal blazon fled from the floor,  
And nought remained on its track ;  
And high in the darkened window-pane  
The shield and the crown were black. 640

And what I say next I partly saw  
And partly I heard in sooth,  
And partly since from the murderers' lips  
The torture wrung the truth.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

For now again came the armèd tread, 645  
And fast through the hall it fell ;  
But the throng was less ; and ere I saw,  
By the voice without I could tell  
That Robert Stuart had come with them  
Who knew that chamber well. 650  
And over the space the Graeme strode dark  
With his mantle round him flung ;  
And in his eye was a flaming light  
But not a word on his tongue.  
And Stuart held a torch to the floor, 655  
And he found the thing he sought ;  
And they slashed the plank away with their swords ;  
And O God ! I fainted not !  
And the traitor held his torch in the gap,  
All smoking and smouldering ; 660  
And through the vapour and fire, beneath  
In the dark crypt's narrow ring,  
With a shout that pealed to the room's high roof  
They saw their naked King.  
Half naked he stood, but stood as one 665  
Who yet could do and dare :  
With the crown, the King was stript away,—  
The Knight was reft of his battle-array,—  
But still the Man was there.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

From the rout then stepped a villain forth,— 670

Sir John Hall was his name ;  
With a knife unsheathed he leapt to the vault  
Beneath the torchlight-flame.

Of his person and stature was the King  
A man right manly strong, 675  
And mightily by the shoulder-blades  
His foe to his feet he flung.

Then the traitor's brother, Sir Thomas Hall,  
Sprang down to work his worst ;  
And the King caught the second man by the neck  
And flung him above the first.

And he smote and trampled them under him ;  
And a long month" thence they bare  
All black their throats with the grip of his hands  
When the hangman's hand came there. 685

And sore he strove to have had their knives,  
But the sharp blades gashed his hands.  
Oh James! so armed, thou hadst battled there  
Till help had come of thy bands ; 689  
And oh! once more thou hadst held our throne  
And ruled thy Scottish lands!



THE KING'S TRAGEDY

But while the King o'er his foes still raged  
With a heart that nought could tame,  
Another man sprang down to the crypt;  
And with his sword in his hand hard-gripp'd 695  
There stood Sir Robert Graeme.

(Now shame on the recreant traitor's heart  
Who durst not face his King  
Till the body unarmed was wearied out  
With two-fold combating! 700

Ah! well might the people sing and say,  
As oft ye have heard aright:—  
“*O Robert Graeme, O Robert Graeme,  
Who slew our King, God give thee shame!*”  
For he slew him not as a knight.) 705

And the naked King turned round at bay,  
But his strength had passed the goal,  
And he could but gasp:— “ Mine hour is come;  
But oh! to succour thine own soul's doom,  
Let a priest now shrive my soul!” 710

And the traitor looked on the King's spent streng-  
And said:— “ Have I kept my word? [th,  
Yea, King, the mortal pledge that I gave?  
No black friar's shrift thy soul shall have,  
But the shrift of this red sword!” 715

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

With that he smote his King through the breast ;  
And all they three in that pen  
Fell on him and stabbed and stabbed him there  
Like merciless murderous men.

Yet seemed it now that Sir Robert Graeme,   720  
Ere the King's last breath was o'er  
Turned sick at heart with the deadly sight  
And would have done no more.

But a cry came from the troop above :—  
“ If him thou do not slay,                               725  
The price of his life that thou dost spare  
Thy forfeit life shall pay ' ”

O God ! what more did I hear or see,  
Or how should I tell the rest ?  
But there at length our King lay slain               730  
With sixteen wounds in his breast.

O God ! and now did a bell boom forth,  
And the murderers turned and fled ;—  
Too late, too late, O God, did it sound !—  
And I heard the true men mustering round,   735  
And the cries and the coming tread.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

But ere they came, to the black death-gap  
Somewise did I creep and steal ;  
And lo ! or ever I swooned away, 739  
Through the dusk I saw where the white face lay  
In the Pit of Fortune's Wheel.

---

And now, ye Scottish maids who have heard  
Dread things of the days grown old,—  
Even at the last, of true Queen Jane  
May somewhat yet be told, 745  
And how she dealt for her dear lord's sake  
- Dire vengeance manifold.

'Twas in the Charterhouse of Perth,  
In the fair-lit Death-chapelle,  
That the slain King's corpse on bier was laid 750  
With chaunt and requiem-knell.

And all with royal wealth of balm  
Was the body purified ;  
And none could trace on the brow and lips  
The death that he had died. 755

In his robes of state he lay asleep  
With orb and sceptre in hand ;  
And by the crown he wore on his throne  
Was his kingly forehead spann'd.

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And, girls, 'twas a sweet sad thing to see                   760  
    How the curling golden hair  
As in the day of the poet's youth,  
    From the King's crown clustered there.

And if all had come to pass in the brain  
    That throbbed beneath those curls,                   765  
Then Scots had said in the days to come  
That this their soil was a different home  
    And a different Scotland, girls !

And the Queen sat by him night and day,  
    And oft she knelt in prayer,                   770  
All wan and pale in the widow's veil  
    That shrouded her shining hair.

And I had got good help of my hurt :  
    And only to me some sign                   774  
She made ; and save the priests that were there,  
    No face would she see but mine.

And the month of March wore on apace ;  
    And now fresh couriers fared  
Still from the country of the Wild Scots  
    (With news of the traitors snared.                   780

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

And still as I told her day by day,  
Her pallor changed to sight  
And the frost grew to a furnace-flame  
That burnt her visage white.

And evermore as I brought her word, 785  
She bent to her dead King James,  
And in the cold ear with fire-drawn breath  
She spoke the traitors' names.

But when the name of Sir Robert Graeme  
Was the one she had to give, 790  
I ran to hold her up from the floor ;  
For the froth was on her lips, and sore  
I feared that she could not live.

And the month of March wore nigh to its end,  
And still was the death-pall spread ; 795  
For she would not bury her slaughtered lord  
Till his slayers all were dead.

And now of their dooms dread tidings came,  
And of torments fierce and dire ;  
And nought she spake,—she had ceased to speak,—  
But her eyes were a soul on fire. 801

*THE KING'S TRAGEDY*

But when I told her the bitter end  
Of the stern and just award,  
She leaned o'er the bier and thrice three times  
She kissed the lips of her lord. 805

And then she said,—“ My King, they are dead ! ”  
And she knelt on the chapel-floor,  
And whispered low with a strange proud smile,—  
“ James, James, they suffered more ! ”

Last she stood up to her queenly height, 810  
But she shook like an autumn leaf,  
As though the fire wherein she burned  
Then left her body, and all were turned  
To winter of life-long grief. 814

And “ O James ! ” she said,—“ My James ! ” she  
“ Alas for the woful thing, [said,—  
That a poet true and a friend of man,  
In desperate days of bale and ban  
Should needs be born a King ! ” 819

---



## NOTES

---

1. *I Catherine am a Douglas's bar.* This Catherine Douglas, called Barlass from the circumstance narrated in this ballad, because she attempted to use her arm as a bar to keep out the King's murderers, is reported to have married Alexander Lovell of Bolunnie, and to be the ancestress of the Barlass family.

Of her romantic act of devotion, Mr. Andrew Lang says in his History of Scotland, "the legend of Catherine Douglas who barred the boltless door with her arm is, unfortunately, late and perhaps apocryphal."

4. *many a waning year* : "waning" is equivalent to "passing." The root idea of the word is "paleness, and hence "passing into decay or dissolution," and so "passing away."
5. *This old arm* : the arm with which she had tried to bar the door.  
*withered* : lost its shapeliness, become thin, through advancing years.
6. *deft* : skilful, capable.
7. *to wing the shaft* : to shoot well at archery.
8. *the palm-play ball* : an early form of tennis played



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

in enclosed courts, and in other respects resembling the game of fives.

13. *chambère* : chamber. It is thus spelt and accented for the sake of the rhyme.

19. *pent* : shut up.

20. *By his friends at first and then by his foes* : King James was born in 1394. Owing to the unsettled state of the kingdom his father, Robert III, committed the young Prince to the protection of Henry Wardlaw, Bishop of St. Andrews, and founder of the University in that city. From the protection of this learned and powerful prelate the Prince was removed by Sir David Flemming, a person of dubious integrity, and brought to Berwick in 1406. From there he was sent to France by sea, but was captured by the English and brought a prisoner to the Tower, where he remained for many years. Though kept a prisoner, Henry IV and his successor caused him to be educated and treated as a Royal Prince and heir to the throne of Scotland. He was crowned King of Scotland in 1424.

22. The eldest son of Robert III, Rothesay, died suddenly while a prisoner in the hands of his enemy Albany and his brother-in-law Douglas, in 1402. Both these nobles were acquitted of the charge of murder in a Parliament held at Holyrood in the same year. But the coincidence, and the character of Albany were bound to arouse popular suspicion.

## NOTES

26. *the Bass Rock fort* : the castle of the Bishop of St. Andrews
28. *Henry the subtle Bolingbroke*. Bolingbroke was the surname of Henry IV.
29. *southron* : southern (archaic).
- 31, 32. "Shewed his worth in all kingly qualities."
34. *lore* : learning.
37. *bowers* : summerhouse. As the King tells his own story, it was as she walked in the garden that he first saw his Queen.  
     *a lady* : Jane Beaufort, daughter of the Earl of Somerset, and a grand-daughter of John of Gaunt.
41. *a sweeter Song : The Kingis Quhair*, i.e. the King's Book. (see Note l. 316)
45. *troun* : trouble, harm (archaic).
58. *swains* : rustic lovers. The word is associated with the special vocabulary of Pastoral poetry.
66. *Alack the day !* An exclamation denoting regret.
68. *England's wrong renewed*. The Union of England and Scotland took place in 1707. Up to that date the two countries were constantly at war with one another. Each thought the other to blame, and this story is told from the Scotch point of view.
72. *At the leaguer of Roxbro' hold* : i.e. at the siege of Roxburgh Castle, in 1436. James laid siege to Roxburgh Castle, which was held by the English, in revenge for an attempt which had been made by them to capture Princess Margaret, the King's

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

daughter, who was that year sent to France to marry the heir to the French throne.

77. *a band of his noblest lords* : It is impossible to say who these were, as the existence of the conspiracy is purely conjectural, but it is certain that King James' policy towards the great nobles was calculated to estrange them.
90. *raise* : relinquish.
92. *Liege* : King, him to whom they had sworn allegiance.
94. *louring brows* : scowling faces.
101. *And many a lordly wrong-doer* : This line is of considerable metrical interest. In the present lawless state of English prosody it is impossible to dogmatize, but we may submit that no good purpose is served by the mispronunciation of English words "to suit the metre," certainly euphony least of all. The line consists of four divisions, which we may call *feet*. When we come to give these feet distinctive names, it is usual, though inaccurate and at times misleading, to use the names of classical quantitative feet. Thus the feet in this verse are; iamb, anapaest, iamb, trochee, not iamb by mispronunciation.
- It is a daring and unusual combination, but the sensitive ear will at once acknowledge that it is justified.
103. *Sir Robert Traume*, who was afterwards the king's chief assassin, had suffered much in his pride by

## NOTES

affronts done to his kinsmen and himself by the king. He had himself been imprisoned, and more than one of his relatives had been deprived of their lands, and even of their lives.

105. *Three Estates*: the three classes which made up the Parliament. They were the Clergy, the Nobles, and the Commons.

110. *sire*: king, usually a form of address.

117. *to league*: to combine.

120. *arow thy gage*: acknowledge you as its champion.

121. *liege lords*: lords who are, or have sworn to be, loyal.

*hale*: drag (archaic).

122. *fired*: flushed.

124. *a witless wage*: a fool's reward.

126. *privy*: secret (archaic, but *cf.* the Privy Council).

128. *the country of the wild Scots*: the north of Scotland, called the Highlands.

130. *Edinbro'*: Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland.

137. *mortal foe*: foe till death, implacable foe.

138. *proper*: very own (archaic).

139. *Against the coming of Christmastide*: when Christmas should come.

*Against* implies future time in this sense, with an idea of preparation for some event; e.g. "against his return." This use is slightly archaic and should not be imitated in the writing of modern English.

141. *Black Friars*: Friars of the Order of St. Dominic,

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

called *Black* from the colour of their habit (i.e. their special distinctive dress).

*Charterhouse* : the English form of the name of the houses of the Carthusians, a body of monks. The name is derived from the famous house of the Grande Chartreuse in France, to which St. Bruno, the founder of the Carthusians, retired about 1086. The distinctive feature of the Carthusians is that, while they did not abandon the community life of Western monasticism in matters of organization, they endeavoured to combine with it the discipline of the solitary, contemplative life of the hermits, who were the earliest examples of the Christian recluse. Of them, the chronicler Bower says, "The Carthusians leave the world to live in thirst, hunger, and chastity. They do not raise the physically dead to life, but to immortal life they raise men dead in trespasses and sins."

James himself had founded this house at Perth. He kept Christmas there in 1436 and stayed on until February 20, 1437.

2. *solemn* : the word combines the ideas of the religious significance of the Christmas Feast, and of the pomp with which it was kept on this occasion.
6. *the Scottish Sea* : the Firth of Forth. The incident that follows is thus noted by Mr. Andrew Lang :  
"At the Water of Leith a Celtic seeress warned him, that if he crossed, he would never return alive. . . ."

## NOTES

The Highland wise-wife. (who may have got her news normally from one of Graham's caterans) attributed her knowledge to information acquired from one Huthart, possibly her familiar."

147. *That eve was clenched for a boding storm* : as night fell, it threatened to become stormy. Notice should be taken of the very careful manner in which, in this and the following stanzas, Rosetti contrives to make the natural setting of this incident contribute very largely to the effect produced on the reader.
166. *ruck* : a bank of clouds driven before the wind.
170. *champing* : The metaphor has a double applicability, (1) to the white foam like the froth on the bit of a champing horse, and (2) to the restless impatience of the waves reminiscent of a restive horse.
171. *held his eyes* : compelled him to look at her.
173. *wraith* : here used correctly for a mysterious disembodied appearance of a living person. "Wraith" is frequently, but incorrectly, used as a synonym for "ghost."
176. *'Twixt the Duchray and the Dhu* : small streams on the northern shore of the Firth of Forth.
177. *shroud* : burial clothes (as also *cerecloth* in line 181 and *winding-sheet* in line 194).
179. *Inchkeith Isle* : an island in the Firth of Forth.
183. *the Links of Forth* : the reaches of the river before it falls into the Firth.
192. *drouth* : primarily the word means "want"; here it

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

may be taken in the sense of *need*, the King being, as it were, hard pressed by Death.

197. *fain* : glad, eager.  
 212. *Feast of His Son* : Christmas (see note on l. 245).  
 217. *hind* : a country labourer, one of the humblest of the King's subjects.  
 224. *the Fiend* : literally, the Enemy ; hence, the Devil.  
 227. *very* : true, actual.  
 230. *nor limb nor eye* . poetic version of "neither limb nor eye."  
 245. *the Christmas Feast being done* : The period of the Christmas festivities extends by common usage from Christmas-day, December 25th, to the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6th. On very special and rare occasions in the Middle Ages, the period might, without too much inappropriateness, be further extended to Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady, February 2nd. The date of the murder of the King was February 20th.  
 247. *a wind-wild eve* : a stormy evening.  
 251. *lift* : rising ground.  
 260. *the Earl of Athole* : was a near relative to the King and heir to the throne after his children. He was the grandfather of Robert Stuart the chamberlain.  
 276. *behove* : suit.  
 291. *stark* . strong, resolute.  
 295. *soothfastness* : steadfastness, loyalty.  
 300. *wrought* : produced. Past tense of "work" (*archaic*) ; more usually used as an adjective, cf. "wrought iron."

## NOTES

305. *in Windsor's castle-hold*: Though the place of James's confinement in England was the Tower of London, tradition has placed the scene of his first meeting with Jane Beaufort at Windsor, probably wrongly.
316. ff. The portions of the ballad in italics are an adaptation from James's own poem, *The Kingis Quhair*, one of the most beautiful products of Scottish discipleship to Chaucer. The Royal authorship of this poem has been doubted in some quarters, mainly on the ground of its excellence, a quality which is never held to debar the songs of Burns from being acknowledged to be the work of that marvellous rustic.

Rosetti himself felt that to adapt a work of genius in the beautiful Rime Royale was a daring experiment. Most of those who know anything of King James's book feel that the experiment has not justified itself, and this failure is bound to affect their judgment of *The King's Tragedy*.

The Rime Royale is a Chaucerian importation from French poetry. It is used by him in *The Parlement of Foules* and in the greatest of all his poems *Troilus and Cresseide*. It received its name later from its use by King James, and was employed with great success by Dunbar, and with astonishing mediocrity by the English imitators of Chaucer until Sackville gave back to it dignity and music in the Induction to *The Mirrour for Magistrates*.



## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

This form is a stanza of seven decasyllabic lines rhyming *ababbcc*. By democratic people it is sometimes called the *Troilus* stanza, but the more graceful title is also the more usual.

317. *kalends* : the first day of the month in the Roman calendar.
322. *grace* : favour.
334. *wonder* : an archaic adjectival form, meaning "wondrous," "wonderful."
341. *spuee* : spaciousness.
343. *aventure* : adventure.
347. *happed* : happened (archaic).  
*lessen gun my sore* : my unhappiness began to grow less.
348. *rancour* : suffering.
- \*358. *grinning skull* : Death's emblem.
- 364-5. There is a double application of these lines (1. There were actually in the song words referring to the uncertainty of fortune and the inscrutability of the future. (2) These words were especially appropriate to the situation in which the King then was. .
375. *astound* : "astonied" in the Biblical sense. The idea of astonishment is not altogether absent, but the dominant notion is that of dazed amazement.
376. *wist not* : knew not (archaic).
388. *pearl-tir'd* : crowned with pearls, or more probably ornamented by strings of pearls, or even individual pearls fastened on to her hair.

## NOTES

390. *fain* : eager.

399. 'Twas then a knock came at the outer gate. This line presents some difficulties in scansion. The simplest way to divide it would be:

'Twas then | a knock came | at the out | er gate.

This division is probably correct, but it leaves a problem in the scansion of the second group or "foot".

The position of the guttural sounds makes a pause of appreciably more than the usual length necessary to ensure distinct pronunciation. The effect of this is to give to "knock" and "came" what is practically an equal value, giving the scansion a *knōck cāme*, a most unusual English foot, and not a very euphonious one. On the other hand, to read the line so as to be able to scan *ā knōck cāme* is to give it the lilt and the meaninglessness of a small child's recitation. The line is metrically unsatisfactory, and most readers will feel it to be so.

404. *usher*: an official whose duty it is to announce the arrival of guests and to bring them into the presence of the host.

406. *ween* : think (archaic).

418. *Voidee cup* : a cup of wine drunk by all present before they separated for the night.

424. *riven and brast* : wrenched off and burst open.

432. *bower-maids* : ladies of the bed-chamber, maids in waiting.

433. *the moat*. The monastery was strongly *circumvallated* and had at least some of the defences of a castle or manor-house.

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

- The line implies the existence of a double wall, making what were called the outer and inner ward, as well as a moat, or deep ditch, filled with water.
440. *ingle-nook* : literally, the chimney-corner, a seat inside a great fire place, close up to the fire; the actual meaning is clearly the fire place. "Ingle" means a fire burning on the hearth.
442. *arras'd wall* : a wall hung with tapestry or arras (see note on l. 588).
445. *light* : prepared, made.
454. *anear* : near (archaic).
462. *dule to dree* : to endure heart-sorrow. "dule" means "mourning"; cf. "dole"; "dree" means "to endure. to suffer."
469. *Aberdour* : a small town on the Fifeshire coast of the Firth of Forth.
471. *death-light* : the death-light is a kind of halo, or aureole, seen round the wraith of a person about to die.
473. *erst* : formerly.  
*full season* : appointed time.
485. *For every man etc* : The meaning is, "From the birth of every man until his death, a death-shadow grows up like a plant by the place where he will die."
505. *to his hand* : within reach.
515. *cross'd his brow and breast* : made the sign of the cross on his forehead and breast.
518. *quest* : search; object of their coming.
532. *heft* : a dialectal word meaning 'weight'.
538. *crypt* : a hidden place. The name is used ordinarily only

## NOTES

of the burial vault beneath a Church, or more strictly of any chamber underneath a Church. Sometimes these crypts are themselves consecrated Churches, as for example the crypt of Worcester Cathedral, dedicated to St. Wulfstan, first Bishop of that diocese. Here "crypt" is used as equivalent to "vault", "cellar".

545. *palm* : the palm-play, tennis (see note l. 8).

556. *knit* : close, compact. *cf.* "a well-knit frame."

558. *compass* : accomplish. In modern English, it is seldom used in this sense.

560. *hearthstone-sill* : plank on which the hearthstone rests.

574. *ken* : knowledge, understanding. In modern English, used only in the expression 'beyond one's ken.'

585. *titters* : the hangings of the bed.

588. *arrās* : tapestry made at Arras, which frequently hung sufficiently far away from the wall for a man to hide behind it. It will be remembered by readers of *Hamlet* that Polonius met his death through trusting to this hiding place.

610. *reck* : take heed of. Used only in rhetoric and poetry.

615. *can* : can do.

664. *naked* : unarmed. The word was used in this sense certainly as late as the eighteenth century. Squire Weston uses it in *Tom Jones* suggesting that it was then becoming old-fashioned, but not archaic.

665. *half naked* : Here the word is clearly used in the sense of "unclothed" which is historically accurate

## THE KING'S TRAGEDY

(though no emphasis is laid on the fact that the king had already begun to undress, in the poem).

668. *reft* : bereft.

675. *right* : very ; cf. " banqueted right royally."

710. *Let a priest now shrive my soul*. 'Shriving' is the giving of absolution by a priest after hearing a confession. The King's murderers, even had they wished to show mercy on his soul and to avoid the additional sin of killing him unconfessed, could not have done so, as the success of their enterprize depended upon haste.

717. *pen* : a confined space.

738. *somevise* : somehow.

739. *or ever* : before. Now used only in poetry.

749. *Death-chapelle* : the chapel where the dead King was lying in state. The spelling may, perhaps, be intended to indicate that accent falls on the second syllable of the word "chapel," but the suggestion of a French pronunciation does not help the poor rhyme.

751. *Requiem-knell* : the tolling of the bell as a call to the Faithful to pray for the repose of the soul of the person departed.

773. *I had got good help* : I had been healed, or was being healed.

782. *to sight* : perceptibly.

818. *bale* : wrath, strife.

